

## In the Haunt of the Grey Butcher Bird (*Cracticus torquatus*)

By DONALD F. F. THOMSON, R.A.O.U., Canterbury, Vic.

During the spring, amongst the army of birds that followed the plough or perched nearby on a point of vantage, to pounce upon the cockchafer grubs turned over by the mouldboard, was a pair of Grey Butcher Birds (*Cracticus torquatus*).

For some time I watched them carefully without obtaining any clue as to the whereabouts of the nest I felt sure was close by. On October 7th, however, I was rewarded by seeing one bird fly off into the timber with a mouthful of grubs. I watched until it vanished in the trees, but hearing its loud echoing calls, I knew it had not gone far. After a short search I found the nest, about 20 feet high in a messmate or stringy bark sapling so slender and straight that I was afraid photography would be difficult.

A second nest was discovered on the same day. It contained two newly hatched nestings, and one egg, already cracking, from which the bird was about to emerge. This nest was also about 20 feet high, but photography was practically impossible. The male, though calling in the locality, displayed not the slightest signs of alarm or annoyance as I climbed the dense *Casuarina* tree to the nest. The female, brooding, sat tight until I was within a few feet of her, when she quietly slipped off the nest. After examining the nest, I descended the tree; the female went to a branch beside the nest, where she sat as if in great sorrow or dejection, and was still there when I left. It was remarkable, and intensely interesting.

I noticed somewhat similar behaviour on the part of this species at a later date. The extraordinarily quiet and detached air of this pair of birds gave me an altogether false impression of the nature of the species.

I spent the afternoon in building a strong staging upon which to work the camera at the first nest. It proved a long job, and the lifting of the green saplings into position was heavy work.

The birds, during the early part of my operations, were singularly silent and indifferent, remaining away from the locality for long intervals. Often, however, as I toiled at my staging, in the silence of the bush, one of the birds would swoop, like a bolt from the blue, with a swirl of wings and a horrible grating cry just over my head. More than once I received a scare, for, though these visitations were repeated at intervals, I was generally caught unawares. I was somewhat taken aback, to say the



Upper—Male with a lizard.                      Lower—Female.  
Grey Butcher Birds (*Cracticus torquatus*), nest and young.

least, after my experience with the second pair at their nest, though the wicked, beady, black eye and hooked bill might have given me a suggestion of the true nature of the bird.

It was not until I became intimately acquainted with this particular pair of Butcher Birds, that I realised, and began to appreciate, the wonder of some of the notes of this bird. Admittedly, many of its notes are unmusical, nay, even harsh, but it has some of the fullest and richest notes, and the most glorious piping song I have heard from any bird. I now believe the song of the Butcher Bird at its best to be the finest song of any Australian bird which I know. To be fully appreciated, it must be heard in the deepest silence of the bush, and be uttered by both birds in unison.

Like many birds, I believe that the Butcher Bird sings its purest and best in moments of intense emotion, not only of happiness, but also of pain or sorrow. Certainly I have never been more moved by the song of any creature than when both birds burst into song in chorus, their heads held high, their bodies, down to the tips of their wings and tails, aquiver with the intensity of the song. Would that others could have heard it too; there would be more true bird-lovers amongst us!

On October 8th I visited the nest again, and the birds became a little less shy. Next morning I went early to the nest and placed the camera in position, lashing it to the staging. Owing to the tall, thin nature of the saplings to which the staging was lashed, the whole structure swayed when the wind blew, in regular motion, like the roll of a ship. I used a long ladder to reach the staging from the ground.

The birds daily became more confident, and no longer refused to visit the nest. As usual, I operated the camera without the use of any distance release, and so became the centre of a very lively situation. So much so in fact that I was obliged to put my head under the focussing cloth for protection. Through the trees they would come, with their direct flight, like winged arrows, shooting past my head and snapping their bills viciously. I was always thankful that my eyes were not in their tracks.

At first, the female alone fed the nestlings; the male merely flying around, uttering his harsh alarm notes and attacking me from time to time. Later, however, he too assisted in the feeding operations. Though both birds fed the young, apparently the female alone brooded. On one occasion, whilst the female was brooding, the male arrived with a dainty morsel. The female, however, did not offer to move, but opened her own beak, whereupon the dutiful male fed her. Unfortunately, the light was too poor for photography. During the day heavy rain and hail fell. As the female returned to the nest to shelter the young, I was able to obtain a photograph of her, after a shower,

brooding. The rain drops may be seen glistening on the twigs below the nest.

After feeding the young, both birds would sit on the edge of the nest and look intently at the nestlings, sometimes gazing for several seconds at a time. So pugnacious did the male become during the day, that often, after feeding the young, he would pause on the side of the nest, suddenly launching himself at the camera, shooting quickly past. Once, during the day, he struck my head and also my finger, even drawing a speck of blood. This was the first occasion upon which I had known a wild bird actually to touch me in defence of its young.

Though the day was dull, and I could do practically no photography, yet during several hours spent a few feet from the nest, I learnt much of the intimate life and habits of the bird. In spite of heavy rain, I was obliged to leave the camera out, covered only by an oilskin coat, for many days and nights. On Wednesday, October 12th, I had a splendid day with the Butcher Birds. The day was cloudy at times, and exceedingly muggy and warm, but the birds were unaffected by it, being extremely bold and fierce. All idea of feeding the young seemed to have left them when I first arrived upon the scene, but after a long wait, my patience was rewarded by several good pictures.

At first the birds had fed the nestlings with insects, including many moths. To-day one dragon fly was brought, and small lizards were fed very freely. It was an interesting and ridiculous sight to see the wagging head of a nestling with the tail of a lizard hanging from its mouth, the protruding tail still writhing. The youngsters appeared to thrive on their reptilian diet, and were always ready for more. I obtained a photograph of the male at the nest with a lizard in his beak. As the day went on, the male became still more savage. He would suddenly flash into view, and, perching sidelong on a sapling as if to muster his strength and measure his distance, launch himself with a harsh note, or perhaps, with an ominous silence, broken only by the swishing of wings, striking as he shot past. His mate also joined him at intervals. I must confess that I breathed a little more freely when they had passed. Nevertheless, to have to shield my eyes all day, and continually dodge the birds, was rather a novelty.

It appeared that the birds did not feed the youngsters continuously all day, but full-fed them at intervals. That this was the case was further suggested by the absence of the birds at intervals, for more or less long periods, whilst at other times they would join in an attack upon me instead of attending to their domestic duties.

It was a unique pleasure and privilege to spend so many days in the home of this glorious songster and to study and photograph his intimate home life.